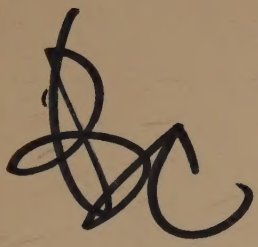
EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON



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Edwin Arlington Robinson

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BY

MARK VAN DOREN

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EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON
THE MAN AND HIS CAREER

I

THE MAN AND HIS CAREER

THE best of living American poets did not wait until the year 1927 to give evidence of his quality. His offering of "Tristram" to a larger public than has so far greeted any of his volumes will doubtless consolidate a reputation that has been steadily growing; but both the reputation and the rank of Mr. Robinson have been firmly fixed for years in that quarter where poets, more than any other writers, need support—in the quarter occupied by literary critics. The story of Mr. Robinson's slow rise to fame, connected as it is with the picture of his extraordinary personality, is the first thing that should be written in any account either of the man or of his output.

All who have spoken of Mr. Robinson have emphasized quite properly the matchless in-

tegrity of his career and of his behavior as an artist. His life, so far as poetry is concerned, has been all one piece; he has devoted himself to his work with an absolute consistency; he has put forth no extraneous effort in order to force acceptance of his art. Beginning to write when there was no good poetry being written in the United States, or almost none, he made his way silently through the obscurity which wrapped him for a decade. Coming then into his own among those judges, however few they were, who were competent to pronounce upon him, he remained uninfluenced by anything save his own purpose and his own conscience. And arriving finally at a point where he was recognized by all discriminating readers as the first of American poets, he still kept his counsel, preferring to let others speak if speaking had to be done. He is not only the best, he is the most reticent poet.

The few details of his life that we possess have had to be dug out of the past by patient inquiry; and he has said almost nothing about his books themselves—how they came to be

written, what they mean to him, what their several qualities are. He did once make a most significant and characteristic remark to Joyce Kilmer, a younger American poet who interviewed him for the New York *Times* in 1916. "Poetry," he said, "is a language that tells us, through a more or less emotional reaction, something that cannot be said. All real poetry, great or small, does this. And it seems to me that poetry has two characteristics. One is that it is, after all, undefinable. The other is that it is eventually unmistakable." Naturally, one who believes that poetry says what cannot be said—and the belief is justified—will not try to say what his own poems are about or what they mean; he will leave them to speak for themselves. And one who has faith that poetry is eventually unmistakable—as it is—will not worry about its acceptance today or tomorrow, will not, for instance, talk for publication in a vain endeavor to recommend what needs no recommendation. To be sure, other great poets, among them Walt Whitman, have beaten a drum in public in order to call at-

tention to work in which they properly had faith; but it would be difficult to prove that this, rather than eventual acceptance by the world, made their reputations.

Mr. Robinson is a New England poet, though half of his life has been spent in New York. He was born at Head Tide, Maine, in 1869, and the next year was taken by his family to Gardiner, Maine, where he grew up. He remembers reciting poetry to his mother while he sat as a child on the kitchen floor, and once he told a friend that some of his own early pieces had been composed in his father's barn. After the customary years of schooling at Gardiner he graduated from high school and went in 1891 to Harvard, where he studied and read for a few years without taking any degree. The ten years which followed, like the remainder of his years to date, are for the most part still obscure. He has not talked about them, and no doubt if asked about them would merely say that then, as always since, he lived the uneventful life of a writer. The events of such a life, of course,

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are chiefly inward ones, consisting of books read, persons met, and ideas gradually taking shape and gathering force. The ten years of which I have spoken are the critical years in the career of an artist, since then it is that he discovers his identity and decides what interests him. Some day we shall know enough to enable us to speak of the steps by which Mr. Robinson came to his maturity. At present we can only speculate.

One of his friends who saw him often during these first years of his authorship has left an interesting picture of a poet enduring poverty cheerfully. Mr. Robinson, as it happens, was living at the time in Yonkers, New York, where another poet who was subsequently to become famous, the Englishman John Masefield, had a short time before been living. It was in Yonkers in 1896, Mr. Masefield has told us, that a first reading of Chaucer and other English poets determined the career which since has given to the world "The Everlasting Mercy," "Reynard the Fox," and other poems. It was at Yonkers in 1900 that

Mr. Fullerton Waldo, who had known Mr. Robinson at Harvard and had admired his earliest verses, saw him once more and had frequent talks with him. Mr. Waldo records in *The Outlook* for November 30, 1922, that Mr. Robinson "was living on an ignominious little street, atilt like a house roof all of cobbles, opposite a factory. It was about the meanest house in the mean street. There he sat forninst a stove . . . , the table draped with a red-checked cloth and linoleum on the floor, and a buxom landlady rattling and poking about." Mr. Robinson had already published a volume of poems at his own expense —"The Torrent and the Night Before," dedicated "To any man, woman, or critic who will cut the edges of it. I have done the top." This was in 1896; and the next year he had issued "The Children of the Night." But the publication of these poems had left him still unknown, and the first of the two volumes is now very seldom to be seen, being in fact one of the greatest of collectors' rareties. Mr. Robinson, apparently unconcerned by the re-

ception he had so far got, was continuing to read and think and write, and in particular to indulge a deep liking for music—a liking which has influenced much of his later writing not only in its themes but in its imagery. William Vaughn Moody the poet and Daniel Gregory Mason the musician came also to Yonkers to see him, according to Mr. Waldo, and the four walked and talked together.

Mr. Waldo next shows Mr. Robinson in New York City. "Not long afterwards he was living in a particularly sordid stall on the fifth floor of a dreary house on West Twenty-third Street. I don't suppose Charles Lamb loved the tidal fulness of life along the Strand or O. Henry the uproar of the Four Million any better than Robinson loved the ferry-seeking traffic before his door or the clack and clangor of the elevated trestles in whose shadow, round the corner, he ate his frugal meals. In the crowd he found his freedom and his solitudes, and in the noise his silence. But the first time I called on him in his dingy and depressing eyrie the room was blue with the smoke of

five bohemians, sitting three on the edge of the bed, one on the only chair, and the other on the window sill. They talked 'wild and whirling words' about the manufacture of poetry, and Robinson, who knew more than all of them about it, only listened. Besides the overpopulated bed and the attenuated and precarious chair the furniture was a bureau with no mirror and a wash-stand with a water pitcher, cracked. I did not stay long. The room, awful as it was, was better than the company that had come to call, unasked, on Robinson. About this time Robinson was checking off loads of stone as carts delivered them at the gaping craters of the new subway."

Mr. Robinson had begun to attract attention as a poet. His third volume, "Captain Craig, a Book of Poems," appeared in 1902 and again in 1903, and even back in Yonkers he had told Mr. Waldo that there were editors of magazines to take his work. But he was far from well known—it was to take another decade and more to establish him in the position

he now holds. Meanwhile he counted loads of stone, lived modestly, and wrote on. In 1905 he issued a second edition of "The Children of the Night." This volume was fortunate in having for one of its reviewers Theodore Roosevelt, then President of the United States.

"It is rather curious," wrote Mr. Roosevelt in *The Outlook* for August 12, 1905, "that Mr. Robinson's volume should not have attracted more attention." The President went on to speak of "an undoubted touch of genius" in the poet's lines, "a curious simplicity and good faith"; and closed, after quotation and more comment, with this challenge: "whether he has the power of sustained flight remains to be seen." Mr. Roosevelt lived to see all the evidence of such power that anyone would be likely to require; and the two men, oddly different as they were in temperament —the one so robust and sanguine and the other so mysteriously taciturn, so mordantly laconic—became good friends. Mr. Robinson was eventually to celebrate Mr. Roosevelt in a poem, "The Revealer." Mr. Roosevelt set

about as early as 1905 to see what material thing could be done for the poet he had championed. Mr. Waldo reports that during a visit to Richard Watson Gilder, editor of the *Century,* he was told by Mr. Gilder: " 'I had lunch a while ago with Roosevelt at the White House. Right in the middle of the meal Mr. Roosevelt pointed a minatory forefinger across the table and shot this at me: "What shall we do with Robinson?" Of course I knew instantly which Robinson he meant. He had discovered Robinson in that article for *The Outlook* written a little while before, which was the beginning of Robinson's larger public vogue. After lunch we got together and discussed the poet's fate. One possibility after another was put forward and rejected. Finally we decided on a consulship in Mexico as the very thing for him. But when the offer was made to him, do you suppose he accepted? Not much; he couldn't make up his mind to tear himself away from New York.' " "Not long after that," says Mr. Waldo, "a berth was found for him in the New York Custom

House. The stipend, modest as it was, must have seemed a fortune to the poet. The days of the sharpest intensity of struggle were behind him." But Mr. Robinson did not suffer himself to remain a clerk very long. In 1909 he abandoned the berth which his well-meaning friends had prepared for him, preferring to get his living where he could find it and to keep his mind free for poetry. He has never been a man whose fate—and fate is a most interesting word to him—could be "decided" even by a President.

"The Town Down the River," a fourth collection of poems, appeared in 1910; and the next year Mr. Robinson formed an association which has probably been the most important in his life as an artist. He went to Peterborough, New Hampshire, as a guest of the MacDowell Colony. The Colony, founded in honor of the composer, Edward MacDowell, offers a summer retreat to American artists who desire peace and space wherein to do their work. Mr. Robinson not only worked well during his first summer there; he has spent

every succeeding summer in Peterborough, and undoubtedly it is to this fact that the character of his output, now come to seem actually prolific for a poet who proceeds so carefully and who once produced so little, must be ascribed.

It is unnecessary, in view of the bibliography at the end of the present essay, to speak of all the books by Mr. Robinson which followed "The Town Down the River." Two plays in prose came first; then "The Man Against the Sky," which received more widespread and enthusiastic praise than any of its predecessors; then "Merlin," the first of a series of six long poems, concluded for the present with "Tristram," which are the basis of Mr. Robinson's claim to be called a major poet; and finally two further collections of miscellaneous pieces. The climax of his fame to date was reached in 1921 with the publication of his "Collected Poems," which won the Pulitzer prize in poetry for that year as "The Man Who Died Twice" won it for 1924. More important than any prize was the recognition

by critics and readers of poetry which attended the appearance of a collected edition wherein the whole record of Mr. Robinson's genius could be studied. The Authors' Club of New York selected the "Collected Poems" as the most significant contribution to American literature made during 1921, and an English edition of the book extended Mr. Robinson's reputation abroad, where it remains securely established.

The general public had been prepared for the "Collected Poems" by the tributes which sixteen other American poets paid through the press to Mr. Robinson on the occasion of his fiftieth birthday in 1919. Among these tributes, displayed together on a page of the New York *Times* for December 21, 1919, were the following:

He is a novelist distilled into a poet. He is the high gossip among the more humorous angels and men.

—*Vachel Lindsay.*

The young men to come will envy us, his contemporaries, who have the chance to tell him of our admiration and affection.—*Amy Lowell.*

As a craftsman he is a master, as a thinker he is subtle and original.—*Edgar Lee Masters.*

Whoever of his contemporaries misses Mr. Robinson's art misses the key to a treasure of rich experience, for his poetry is one of the most valuable yields which this time shall leave to other time.—*Ridgely Torrence.*

Such testimony in many cases means little. In Mr. Robinson's case it meant much, for Mr. Robinson had never betrayed that he was unduly interested in what might be thought of him. He had labored for more than twenty years to perfect himself in a particularly subtle and difficult art; he had maintained an attitude towards that art hardly to be matched in literary history for austerity combined with affectionate fidelity. He had chosen his own themes, looked at the world with his own eyes, patiently arrived at his own opinions; and he had expressed himself in terms which could never conceivably be palatable to unintelligent or insensitive persons. He had told stories, described men and women, evoked moods and memories which only a disciplined imagination can appreciate. His poems were the result

Edwin Arlington Robinson in his studio at the MacDowell Colony, Peterborough, New Hampshire, where "Tristram" was written.

of long and by no means happy brooding over the fundamental perplexities of a life wherein most good things are fragile and soon gone. He was an unusually thoughtful poet; and such poets are not always rewarded in their own time. Just what he thought and said will be the subject of other chapters. Here it is sufficient to note how often the word pessimistic has been used to describe his mind, and to remark that if it does apply at all it applies in none of the customary senses. "His humor is of a grim sort," wrote a reviewer of his first volume in *The Bookman* in 1897, "and the world is not beautiful to him, but a prison-house." The world, as we shall see, is very beautiful to Mr. Robinson. As to the rest of the reviewer's sentence, Mr. Robinson made answer immediately in these significant words:

"The world is not a 'prison-house,' but a kind of spiritual kindergarten, where millions of bewildered infants are trying to spell God with the wrong blocks."

THE SHORTER POEMS

II

THE SHORTER POEMS

IT is well known that Mr. Robinson's picture of life is not a cheerful one. There are more shadows in it than points or areas of light, more discords than harmonies. There is not so much agreement, however, concerning the ratio in which the conflicting elements of hope and despair appear in his work —concerning the ultimate color of his thought. As was said at the end of the last chapter, Mr. Robinson is frequently dismissed as a pessimist because his stories are predominantly tragic, because he is greatly interested in human failures, and because he writes with an unrelieved austerity under the spell of which the reader finds it impossible to forget the seriousness of life on earth. Mr. Robinson himself has asserted that the label of pessimism could have been placed on him

by none but "superficial critics." "In point of fact," he has said, "I recommend a careful reading of my books to anyone who wishes to become an incurable optimist." It must be clear that neither term is more than a term, that neither, applied to Mr. Robinson's complicated utterance, means anything. Better results can be obtained by examining his vision as a whole, by considering what its parts are and how they are related.

Mr. Robinson, I believe, sees life in that profound perspective which permits of its being observed from two angles at once. He sees it realistically at the same moment that he sees it ideally. Ideally the world for him is filled with pure white light. He is particularly fond of the image of light; he speaks of "the gleam" as often as he speaks of "the Word," and they are the same. This ideal light is obviously the most important existing thing to Mr. Robinson; it flickers in the minds of his great men, it shoots its rays across the otherwise gloomy skies under which his stories take place. One of his earliest poems, though

not one of the best, "Credo," furnishes evidence of what I have been saying:

I cannot find my way: there is no star
In all the shrouded heavens anywhere;
And there is not a whisper in the air
Of any living voice but one so far
That I can hear it only as a bar
Of lost, imperial music, played when fair
And angel fingers wove, and unaware,
Dead leaves to garlands where no roses are.

No, there is not a glimmer, nor a call,
For one that welcomes, welcomes when he fears,
The black and awful chaos of the night;
For through it all—above, beyond it all—
I know the far-sent message of the years,
I feel the coming glory of the Light.

And still better evidence is to be found in a poem of his mature period, "The Man Against the Sky":

Where was he going, this man against the sky?
You know not, nor do I.
But this we know, if we know anything:
That we may laugh and fight and sing
And of our transience here make offering
To an orient word that will not be erased,

Or, save in incommunicable gleams
Too permanent for dreams,
Be found or known.

Yet Mr. Robinson is acutely aware that the world we move in is for the most part dark —perhaps completely so—to our eyes. We are "bewildered infants," and the fact that we are trying to spell God rather than some other word does not mean for Mr. Robinson that we should or do succeed. The desire is important. The achievement is undeniably feeble. Mr. Robinson emphasizes this aspect of our twofold human life so powerfully and so consistently that we are tempted to behold him as a man without hope. He does indeed dispense with the plaything known as illusion; he has no illusions as to the possibilities of practical and unbreakable happiness. We must refrain, however, from tagging Mr. Robinson with vulgar terms. He has given expression to as radiant and sinewy a set of speculations as any modern poet has done—and he is as far as anyone from the cheaper varieties of gloom. His distinction lies in the subtlety with which

he has indicated the delicate balance which the universe seems to preserve between good and evil, between day and night, between light and dark, between beauty and deformity, between music and noise.

The two lines meet for Mr. Robinson in the lives of people; the struggle between sun and shadow is studied by him in the characters of men. For he is above all else dramatic in his imagination, and one can conceive him as being quite helpless in the face of such difficulties as I have sketched had he not specific human cases to consider. He is not a professional philosopher; he has not announced ideas. Rather he has identified himself with a series of personalities who have become the subject matter of his poetry. What interests him is the fate of an ideal once it has lodged in the brain of an individual and become mingled with his memory and his desires. Some poets pay their tribute to perfection by attempting to indicate what it is like in itself. Mr. Robinson shows it modifying, if only so very little, and sometimes in the perverse language of failure, the

careers of significant creatures who themselves may be unaware of their significance. His vision is essentially tragic in that it stresses the degeneration of ideas, the dimming of the light, when these become implicated in the rough action of the world. Philosophers get their pleasure out of conceiving ideas as valid somewhere; tragic poets perform their function by showing that at any rate it is not here. Start an idea moving in the lives of real people, they say, and it will drag ruin in its rear, even though it will have stimulated the sense of beauty and the fear of God. Mr. Robinson has treated this complex truth in many and diverse forms. It is interesting, for instance, to remember that he published two plays in 1914 and 1915, and that the heroes were both men convinced of their power to change the lives of others. One, Van Zorn, succeeds; but it is made clear that he is hardly an ordinary human being. Van Zorn is indeed something of a god, and so nothing is proved. Larry Scammon in "The Porcupine" is mere man; and as such he makes a mess of his reforms.

Mr. Robinson first became famous for his series of portraits, frequently done on the small canvas of a single sonnet, of striking—usually tragic—men. Later on his long poems were to show what he could do with complex and extended action. For years, however, he was content with sardonic or witty or merely merry flashes of description, with telling impressions struck off in a few lines. Readers of "The Children of the Night" were greeted in the opening pages with the two strange men John Evereldown and Luke Havergal, and went on to graver specimens in Richard Cory, Aaron Stark, Cliff Klingenhagen, Charles Carville, Fleming Helphenstine, and Reuben Bright. Richard Cory, possessed of riches and of all the graces, "glittered as he walked"; he was the envy of such as looked upon him in his beauty and his pride; yet some unknown thing was the matter with him—perhaps only a suspicion that nothing mattered;

> And Richard Cory, one calm summer night,
> Went home and put a bullet through his head.

Aaron Stark was

Cursed and unkempt, shrewd, shrivelled, and morose.

He was a miser whose soul had hardened until it was like a dollar;

> And oftentimes there crept into his ears
> A sound of alien pity, touched with tears—
> And then (and only then) did Aaron laugh.

Cliff Klingenhagen, one of the happiest of men, preferred wormwood to wine—just why is not told in Mr. Robinson's sonnet, unless it was because, being truly happy, Cliff could taste unhappiness without losing his taste for life, and indeed perhaps felt life most keenly when the draught was bitter on his tongue. Charles Carville's eyes were so sad, and so uncommunicative concerning the cause of their sadness, that only when they were dead and blank at last did they speak for Carville; then they said everything. Fleming Helphenstine and Reuben Bright had their secrets also; and so do all of Mr. Robinson's people, early and late. The poet has told us enough about them to make us aware that their tragedy is of a dis-

tinguished sort, enough to make us respect them while we pity them. But his own respect for them is so great that he keeps us at a certain distance; we watch them suffer without ever being permitted that intimacy which violates the first principle of tragedy: that it shall dignify human nature.

In his sonnet on George Crabbe, the English poet who a hundred years before Mr. Robinson had looked at the world with a pair of eyes equally unflinching and unsoftened, the author of "The Children of the Night" announced something like a literary principle.

> Whether or not we read him, we can feel
> From time to time the vigor of his name
> Against us like a finger for the shame
> And emptiness of what our souls reveal
> In books that are as altars where we kneel
> To consecrate the flicker, not the flame.

The flame which Mr. Robinson was consecrating in his first considerable book did not long remain a low white fire; but the foregoing lines could scarcely be improved on as an expression of his artistic conscience. Another

sonnet on a literary theme was significant for a different reason. The subject was Thomas Hood, most often remembered for his humorous poems. For Mr. Robinson, Hood was not merely a jokester; he was

> The man who cloaked his bitterness within
> This winding-sheet of puns and pleasantries.

Mr. Robinson too is a humorous poet, and famous as such. But only very seldom has he written humorously without suggesting that the edge of wit dissolves, even while it flashes and seems to be tempered steel, under the acid of tragedy or the salt of irony.

Mr. Robinson's shorter poems, whether in "Captain Craig," in "The Town Down the River," in "The Man Against the Sky," in "The Three Taverns," or in "Dionysus in Doubt," have all been remarkable for their fusion, with now one element predominating and now another, of the qualities and the moods thus far defined.

Some of them have been products of a witty intellect playing with ideas or persons

for the sheer fun of the play. In "The Children of the Night" there had been a poem, "Two Men," confessing for Mr. Robinson his curiosity, never alas to be satisfied, concerning a pair of characters mentioned but once in all literature.

> Melchizedek, he praised the Lord,
> And gave some wine to Abraham;
> But who can tell what else he did
> Must be more learned than I am.
>
> Ucalegon, he lost his house
> When Agamemnon came to Troy;
> But who can tell me who he was—
> I'll pray the gods to give him joy.

"Isaac and Archibald," in "Captain Craig," is for Mr. Robinson an unusually sunny and engaging picture of two ancient rural men. Both Isaac and Archibald are growing old, but neither will admit it of himself—though each is more than willing to hint and assert it of the other. The situation is most charitably set forth in terms of an adoring boy's reaction to it and to the personalities of the pair. "Uncle Ananias," in "The Town Down the River,"

presents another old man through the affectionate eyes of youth. Uncle Ananias sits under trees in the spring and tells nothing but lies—and is amply pardoned for doing so.

How fondly I remember the delight
That always glorified him in the spring;
The joyous courage and the benedight
Profusion of his faith in everything!
He was a good old man, and it was right
That he should have his fling.

Miniver Cheevy, undoubtedly Mr. Robinson's best known comic man, is none the less comic for the touch of absurd longing with which his never too mirthful creator has endowed him. Miniver hankered after the times—all of them—into which he had not been born.

Miniver mourned the ripe renown
That made so many a name so fragrant;
He mourned Romance, now on the town,
And Art, a vagrant.

Miniver loved the Medici,
Albeit he had never seen one;
He would have sinned incessantly
Could he have been one.

Miniver cursed the commonplace
And eyed a khaki suit with loathing;
He missed the medieval grace
Of iron clothing.

Miniver scorned the gold he sought,
But sore annoyed was he without it;
Miniver thought, and thought, and thought,
And thought about it.

Eben Flood, the hero of a more recent poem, "Mr. Flood's Party," is one of Mr. Robinson's most touching old men; he touches us to laughter by the elaborate device to which he resorts—walking home one night from Tilbury Town to his lonely farm—in order that he may drink as long as he likes from the jug he carries. He touches us also to pity through the very loneliness of the act, and through the pretense thereby achieved that he has company after all—even if it is only himself talking to himself and inviting himself to taste of the fateful fluid which, as with so many of Mr. Robinson's men, Tilbury Town thinks he knows far too well. Mr. Flood is neither the first nor the last of the many people placed

by Mr. Robinson in his mythical village of Tilbury Town with the notion thoroughly imbedded in them that life is difficult and sore, a thing to be handled like this jug:

Then, as a mother lays her sleeping child
Down tenderly, fearing it may awake,
He set the jug down slowly at his feet
With trembling care, knowing that most things break;
And only when assured that on firm earth
It stood, as the uncertain lives of men
Assuredly did not, he paced away,
And with his hand extended paused again. . . .

Mr. Robinson has laughed at men, and laughed as lightly as it is given him to laugh. He has achieved a graver effect with certain men to whom he has given laughter as a tragic gift. His picture of human life, more or less gay on this surface which I have been describing, deepens suddenly in such poems as "Captain Craig," which yields a full-length portrait of one who has failed in everything except the faculty of mirth. Captain Craig, certainly one of Mr. Robinson's most princely creatures, is nevertheless one of Tilbury Town's no-

bodies. Only a few young men, one of whom tells the story, suspect his depth; and these gather about him periodically in order to hear the old reprobate deliver himself of generalizations like the following:

"Then shall at length come ringing through the sun,
Through time, through flesh, a music that is true.
For wisdom is that music, and all joy
That wisdom:—you may counterfeit, you think,
The burden of it in a thousand ways;
But as the bitterness that loads your tears
Makes Dead Sea swimming easy, so the gloom,
The penance, and the woeful pride you keep,
Make bitterness your buoyance of the world.
And at the fairest and the frenziedest
Alike of your God-fearing festivals,
You so compound the truth to pamper fear
That in the doubtful surfeit of your faith
You clamor for the food that shadows eat.
You call it rapture or deliverance,—
Passion or exaltation, or what most
The moment needs, but your faint-heartedness
Lives in it yet: you quiver and you clutch
For something larger, something unfulfilled,
Some wiser kind of joy that you shall have
Never, until you learn to laugh with God."

This is the speech of a reprobate, but the language is that of a sage; it is as such that Mr.

Robinson offers for our understanding this reckless old man whose dying laughter blares and crackles across the human scene. A simpler note, but one no less deep, is struck in "Old King Cole," which tells in stanzas of a deceptive jauntiness the tale of a father in Tilbury Town whose sons and heirs disgraced him—or would have disgraced him had he been less the smiling philosopher. The careers of the two youths strike him a deadly blow, but when the neighbors come to sympathize with him they find him above sympathy, living on a level whence he can look frankly down not only on his own misfortune—which he does not mitigate—but on those who offer to share it with him if he will only relate its particulars.

"This pipe would never make me calm,
This bowl my grief would never drown.
For grief like mine there is no balm
In Gilead, or in Tilbury Town.
And if I see what I can see,
I know not any way to blind it;
Nor more if any way may be
For you to grope or fly to find it."

I have said that the volume called "The Man Against the Sky," published in 1916, did much that year to win for Mr. Robinson the wide attention he so long and so unaccountably had had to go without. And it is safe to say that the poem there called "Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford," now become an American classic, did most to bring about this desirable result. The poem, written to commemorate Shakespeare's tercentenary, is more than what it purports to be, an analysis of Shakespeare's temperament—and as such it belongs with the best of all efforts in its kind. It is a rich reflection of a temperament decidedly better known to Mr. Robinson —his own. No one, probably, knows much about Shakespeare; Mr. Robinson, in trying to understand him and show him through the awkward eyes of Ben Jonson, has at least succeeded in making a number of brilliant and highly characteristic comments on mankind. It is obvious that Jonson is perplexed by his brother-poet. So much unhappiness, joined with so much sudden and inexplicable laugh-

ter, and issuing as suddenly again in bursts of pessimistic eloquence, is beyond the burlier author's comprehension. Something, he decides, has been left out of Shakespeare—the power of illusion, the balance of faith, the blessing of innocence. The genius of the man is also his ruin and his fate; he knows too much—which may mean, Jonson implies, that he knows too little. For Mr. Robinson, of course, this Shakespeare is the hero par excellence; it is intricacies such as his are, contradictions such as he breathes for his natural air, that fascinate the creator of Captain Craig. But Jonson is speaking.

> The coming on of his old monster Time
> Has made him a still man; and he has dreams
> Were fair to think on once, and all found hollow.
> He knows how much of what men paint themselves
> Would blister in the light of what they are;
> He sees how much of what was great now shares
> An eminence transformed and ordinary;
> He knows too much of what the world has hushed
> In others, to be loud now for himself.
> He knows now at what height low enemies
> May reach his heart, and high friends let him fall;
> But what not even such as he may know

Bedevils him the worst: his lark may sing
At heaven's gate how he will, and for as long
As joy may listen, but *he* sees no gate,
Save one whereat the spent clay waits a little
Before the churchyard has it, and the worm. . . .
"It's all a world where bugs and emperors
Go singularly back to the same dust,
Each in his time; and the old, ordered stars
That sang together, Ben, will sing the same
Old stave tomorrow."

"Ben Jonson Entertains a Man from Stratford" is the earliest dramatic monologue—the term, recalling Browning, also recalls the circumstance that its author has often been compared with the Victorian poet—to be found in Mr. Robinson's work, unless "Captain Craig" be admitted rather loosely under the head. The form of the dramatic monologue, obviously well fitted to a writer of Mr. Robinson's character and much employed by him during a certain period of his career, seems to have offered him the means of transition between the simpler forms of the sonnet, the quatrain, and the octave with which he began, and the definitely major form of the

long dramatic narrative, examples of which will be the subject of the next chapter. In a miscellaneous volume published in 1919, "The Three Taverns," he made particularly good use of the more limited dramatic form. The poem which gives the book its title explores the mind of St. Paul at a critical moment in his spiritual career, as he journeyed doubtfully towards Rome. "On the Way" is a dialogue between Hamilton and Burr ten years or so before their duel. "John Brown" reveals the hero of Osawatomie, speaking in prison after his hard day is done. "Lazarus" studies the plight of one who, having touched two worlds, now can take neither for his own. Mr. Robinson, whose favorite reading is said to be biography, proved the truth of the saying in "The Three Taverns." It is fitting that he whose interest is so exclusively in people's lives should be a student of the lives of real men and women in past time; it was inevitable that such a man should produce such a book as this. It was not surprising, either, to see the best poem in the volume, "Tasker Norcross,"

treating an imaginary man. Tasker Norcross, whose "tethered range was only a small desert," is one of Mr. Robinson's key characters. By understanding him, and the task is not an easy one, one may arrive at a point whence the rest stand clearly to view. Norcross, in a word, is a man who lacks something —something very hard to describe, and something which many would consider a dispensable trifle. What he lacks is the thing that makes the world about one not a desert but a green and growing place. Mr. Robinson has always been deeply interested in such lost souls, in such deficient pairs of eyes. The reason for the deficiency is sometimes circumstance, sometimes character. But in either case the description is given in terms of tragedy.

Mr. Robinson's shorter poems are many and various, and the perfection they reach is remarkably many-sided. In blank verse, in talkative rhyme, in suave epigram, in running eloquence he has found his forms; in men of all conditions and characters he has found his material. But he still is consistent, as we have

a right to expect all major writers to be, in his presentation of the problem which existence is. A little light in a great deal of darkness, a wisp of music in a universe of irregular and ominous drums—it is in such images that he tells, with all the variety that an artist must achieve if we are to continue attentive, of man's never quite wholly vain struggle for self-respect.

THE LONGER POEMS

III

THE LONGER POEMS

WITHIN the past ten years Mr. Robinson has published six poems each of which possesses a magnitude, not only with respect to length but with respect to theme, that entitles it to entrance into the domain of major art. Without these six poems Mr. Robinson would have remained the great minor poet he already was; with them he joins the company of those poets who have dared to undertake long flights on ambitious wings, and through them he contributes to American literature a body of verse hardly to be matched by any of his predecessors for beauty and importance.

"Merlin" (1917) and "Lancelot" (1920) will be considered at the end of the present chapter, since they look forward to "Tris-

tram," the subject of the chapter to follow. These, together with the three non-Arthurian poems, "Avon's Harvest" (1921), "Roman Bartholow" (1923), and "The Man Who Died Twice" (1924), have much in common beneath their varied surfaces. They are all written in blank verse tempered like a magic blade; they all narrate the careers of men afflicted with abnormal vision, either of truth or of untruth; they all are conceived and executed in passion; and they all carry a weight of thought which is constantly relieved, or perhaps intensified, by a tone of irony ever to be heard behind the austere—and frequently vernacular—lines. They all, too, lay themselves open to the charge which many readers, some of them without the justification which comes of serious effort to understand what they read, have brought against Mr. Robinson. This is the charge of difficulty, of obscurity. Mr. Robinson's poems are admittedly difficult—though that is of course a relative term, depending for its force upon the degrees of ease with which a given reader can share a com-

plicated experience with his author. They are never really obscure. Mr. Robinson once allowed himself to be quoted on the subject, saying of the people who complained: "Why cannot they read one word after another?" If one does just that, employing the imagination on the way and refraining from the expectation that this poet or any other will ever say directly what can only be said indirectly, one will not find Mr. Robinson obscure; and one will be amply rewarded for the effort one has put forth. Contrary to the general belief, good poetry has always been difficult—that is, it has demanded all that the reader had to give it, either of thought or of feeling. It is comparatively easy to know what a poem says, and it is comparatively easy to see how the author felt when he wrote it; it is never easy to comprehend the relationship between the two things, to appreciate how the idea was felt and how the emotion was given form by the brain.

Mr. Robinson in his six poems has given us the results of much thinking; he has also re-

membered that poetry must be passionate to be good. The ideas implicit in these works have poetic value because they mean much—mean everything—to the spirit of their creator. Mr. Robinson, if the description of his process in the preceding chapter was correct, has here only extended that process to make it fit broader materials; his ideas and his images remain on the whole the same. I have spoken more than once of the image of light as being the image in which he saw life reflected. The six poems are all concerned with men who have seen a light and who are both punished and rewarded for so doing. A remark of Captain Craig's may help to show how Mr. Robinson can conceive of vision as holding tragedy in its center.

"Is it better to be blinded by the lights,
Or by the shadows? By the lights, you say?
The shadows are all devils, and the lights
Gleam guiding and eternal? Very good;
But while you say so do not quite forget
That sunshine has a devil of its own,
And one that we, for the great craft of him,
But vaguely recognize."

Mr. Robinson has been deeply concerned with men who see too much; he finds them as pitiable as those men who see too little, or see not at all. This does not mean simply that Mr. Robinson cries out for us to beware of the pride that goeth before a fall, or that he deprecates fanaticism, or that he meets inspiration with cynicism. It is rather that in his passionate skepticism he refuses to agree that any one vision is the universally valid one, that in his view of the battle which silently goes on in the world between darkness and dawn there can never be a decision for man—for any one man at least—to render.

"Avon's Harvest" has for its scene an earth which is almost wholly black. Avon is a chronic victim of fear, the infection having first visited him when he was a boy in school. Another boy, whom now as he tells the story Avon describes with the utmost of virulent loathing, had then filled him with a nameless hatred and dread—so nameless in fact that Avon had never attempted to express them. Only in one final encounter with the boy had

he let them move him to action; and the action was a blow in the evil face before him. Years later he is haunted not merely by the memory of that blow, which has recoiled upon him in the multiple guise of remorse, humiliation, and undischarged venom; he is haunted by the man himself, who every year has sent him word from some part of the world that he still exists and will continue to send word. When the *Titanic* sinks the list of published dead includes the name of Avon's aversion, and for a while Avon, whose soul has been all but strangled by the fingers that reach out from this man's existence, breathes freely and feels warmth returning to him. Then in a cabin in a forest to which he has gone for rest he sees the man once more and is found by friends with a knife in his body; and the tale ends with his dying in his chair at home one night, following a complete disclosure of the situation to a friend. The friend, coming the next morning, is told by the doctor:

> "He died, you know, because he was afraid—
> And he had been afraid for a long time."

Readers and reviewers at the time the poem was published conjectured variously that Avon had seen a ghost, had created to feed his fear an image of one long gone, had died because in some abstract way he was afraid. Mr. Robinson insisted to a younger poet who was interviewing him that Avon's enemy had of course not died on the *Titanic*. "You know," he was quoted as saying, "ghosts don't leave knives. All the reviewers so far have made that mistake. It is simply a more excruciating form of mental torture which he contrived when he let Avon think he was a ghost." The significant thing is that Avon thought he saw a ghost, that Avon felt like one possessed. Mr. Robinson had asked his publishers to announce "Avon's Harvest" as a "metrical dime novel." It is of course no such thing; it is rather a particularly intense study of the corrupting effects of single-minded hate and fear when no other emotions are allowed room in a closed soul.

"Roman Bartholow," longer than "Avon's Harvest," deals with a more intricate situa-

tion, and one more difficult to define. The characters are three: Bartholow, his wife Gabrielle, and his friend and healer Penn-Raven. The scene is a house in a forest by a river where the three fated persons walk and talk and in the end perceive how their lives are fallen into ruin. For the tragedy of this piece is unrelieved. To begin with, Bartholow has been suffering from an obscure disease of the spirit which Penn-Raven, come to him as companion and physician, makes this commentary upon:

"There was a man once who believed himself
Nearer to God, and by the way of reason—
Where few may see, or seeing may dare to go—
Than all the martyrs by the way of faith.
Now, I am not so sure that he was there—
Though I believe it; and if I believe it,
For all my needs I know it. Yes, he was there;
And where he was, he is,—a little scarred
Tonight, but nowhere else than where he was.
There is no going back from such a place—
Or not by the same road; yet there are pits
Along the way, and there are darknesses,
As on all other ways—only far deeper,
And, after an excess of blinding light,

Unconscionably darker. It is well
For him and his humility, I doubt not,
That all should be as obviously it is
Along that way; for he might otherwise find,
With restless and impetuous feet, like yours,
A darker path leading him back again
Where the old road that others had not seen
Might not be seen again, even by him;
And though it might be seen, might not be taken."

Bartholow, in other words, has seen too much; he is blinded by his light. And the penalty is paid by Gabrielle as well as by himself, and eventually it is paid by Penn-Raven.

Bartholow had married Gabrielle and taken her from her world, which is the world of most men and women, into his. The result was not the identification of her with him that he had hoped for, but a division between them that both saw clearly yet could not discuss or resolve. Penn-Raven's coming, though it seemed to bring sanity to Bartholow, did not mend matters. He fell in love with Gabrielle; but Gabrielle, who had been desolate because she was not adequate to Bartholow's world, became more desolate because Penn-Raven's

offered world was not adequate to her. So she walked out one night and drowned herself in the river.

> Now she could see the moon and stars again
> Over the silvered earth, where the night rang
> With a small shrillness of a smaller world,
> If not a less inexorable one,
> Than hers had been; and after a few steps,
> Made cautiously along the singing grass,
> She saw the falling lawn that lay before her,
> The shining path where she must not be seen,
> The still trees in the moonlight, and the river.

The two men talked in the house even while this happened, and later on Bartholow was to hold marvellous conversation with a grotesque philosopher-humorist, Umfraville. All of this talk, like the central theme itself, is as elusive as it is beautiful. No poem of Mr. Robinson's more nearly deserves the accusation of obscurity. But to the careful reader it will be clear enough to repay him with its beauty for the labor of understanding it; and certainly for such a reader it will take its place in the whole scheme of Mr. Robinson's work.

"The Man Who Died Twice" has been

called the best of Mr. Robinson's poems, and while it is fruitless ever to argue such questions there is reason for thinking that it is—more reason than for thinking, as one critic says he does, that it is Mr. Robinson's worst. It is at any rate one of the most emphatic renderings he has given of his vision of man as a creature who carries his distinction in some part of him created tragically to betray it. Fernando Nash, the hero, is a musician and a genius who descends into a strange hell and so loses contact with those strains of music which one he had heard never to hear again.

There was in the man,
With all his frailties and extravagances,
The caste of an inviolable distinction
That was to break and vanish only in fire
When other fires that had so long consumed him
Could find no more to burn; and there was in him
A giant's privacy of lone communion
With older giants who had made a music
Whereof the world was not impossibly
Not the last note; and there was in him always,
Unqualified by guile and unsubdued
By failure and remorse, or by redemption,
The grim nostalgic passion of the great

For glory all but theirs. And more than these,
There was the nameless and authentic zeal
Of power and of ordained accomplishment—
Which may not be infallibly forthcoming,
Yet in this instance came.

This is the final judgment on Fernando, pronounced by one who was with him while he died his second death—the first one, the real one, having been the death of his musical soul. Were it the only memorable passage in the poem, the poem would still be remarkable because it contained so perfect and so passionate an utterance concerning the nature of greatness in artists and in men. But there are other passages as purified by fire; and the whole, with its masterful weaving of the strands of high and low in Fernando, weaving them like strains of music until they tell in the mature tones of tragedy the tale of his rise and fall, of the coming and going of his inspiration—the whole is surely one of the permanently distinguished American poems. Fernando Nash, like all of Mr. Robinson's major characters, journeys terribly alone through the world; and

we go with him. We are with him, for instance, in that squalid room where, at the depth of his dissipation which precedes the brief glory of his one inspired moment, he sees

the coming through the keyhole
Of a slow rat, equipped with evening dress,
Gold eye-glasses, and a conductor's wand,
Soon followed by a brisk and long procession
Of other rats, till more than seventy of them,
All dressed in black and white, and each of them
Accoutred with his chosen instrument,
Were ranged in order on the footworn carpet
That lay between Fernando and the door.
Having no chairs, they stood erect and ready,
And having made obeisance to their master
Upon the wall, who signified his pleasure,
And likewise to the man upon the bed,
They played with unforeseen solemnity
The first chords of the first rat symphony
That human ears had heard. Baffled and scared,
Fernando looked at Bach, who nodded slowly,
And, as he fancied, somewhat ominously;
And still the music sounded, weird but firm,
And the more fearful as it forged along
To a dark and surging climax, which at length
Broke horribly into coarse and unclean laughter
That rose above a groaning of the damned.

"Merlin" was the first of Mr. Robinson's six poems, as "Tristram" is the last. The two, with "Lancelot" between, make a series of compositions on the ancient themes of love and war at King Arthur's court which has no equal, I think, in all of the poetry since the Middle Ages which has treated those themes. There was every reason why Mr. Robinson should become interested in Camelot and the great legendary figures whose fates were settled there, so the stories go, before history began. Camelot and the court of Arthur are not merely subjects rich with associations of the sort that appeal to poets generally; to Mr. Robinson they are a scene, a background, against which the symbols wherethrough he interprets human motive may be grandly projected. Camelot, which crumbles to ruins while he watches, is more than Camelot; Merlin, Arthur, Lancelot, and Guinevere are more than archaic puppets dressed gorgeously to make a poet's holiday; the Holy Grail is more than a light which romantic men go trailing after for nothing save romance. The Grail is

of a piece with that light which Mr. Robinson has always seen—tragedy lurks in it as well as this or that man's ideal. Lancelot, Merlin, and the rest are fully conceived tragic personages. Camelot is a stage set by Mr. Robinson on which to display the whole sublime body of his tragic vision. Critics have pointed out that certain passages in "Merlin" and "Lancelot" are pertinent to the recent war, and have suggested that the poems by intention are commentary upon a contemporary system in ruins. But this is to underestimate the scope of their reference, which surely is to universal issues. Mr. Robinson, starting from Camelot, has attached his imagination to the farthest walls of the human world.

"Merlin," like the two poems which come after it, dispenses with the fairy-tale element so conspicuous in most versions of the Arthurian material. Mr. Robinson is not interested in the legend that Merlin, miraculously born and early endowed with powers of prophecy, foretold all that would happen to Camelot and its king in the way that fortune-

tellers foretell events. As the story of the bearded wizard developed in the Middle Ages, Merlin took on more and more fantastic qualities and powers; and there was the belief that his disappearance from the court was the result of his having fallen in love with an enchantress, Vivian, who imprisoned him in a rocky recess whence he could never escape. This is charming, and Merlin as the later Middle Ages saw him is a curiously appealing figure; but Mr. Robinson makes him no more miraculous than any of the men whom he has created to play leading tragic rôles. His Merlin is a little amused by Arthur's superstitious respect for the vision which after all foresaw no more than wise men see at any time. Mr. Robinson makes Merlin say what only echoes the speeches of Captain Craig and Penn-Raven:

> "I saw
> Too much, and that was never good for man.
> The man who goes alone too far goes mad—
> In one way or another."

Merlin, in other words, pays his particular

penalty for being wise. We first see him when he returns unexpectedly to Camelot from Broceliande in Brittany, the house and garden —not the rocky cave—where for years he has been the willing captive of Vivian's—not any enchantress's—unspeakable charms. His visit saddens him, because now he sees sure signs that Camelot will decay; that Lancelot will betray his liege Lord and that Modred will lead a revolt from which the kingdom cannot recover. This perception has changed all things for him—has introduced him to Change itself. Not even Vivian will be the same when he goes back, as soon he does, to talk with her in Broceliande and tell her that he must no longer dally with her there.

"Tomorrow," he said;
"Tomorrow I shall go away again
To Camelot; and I shall see the King
Once more; and I may come to you again
Once more; and I shall go away again
For ever. There is now no more than that
For me to do; and I shall do no more.
I saw too much when I saw Camelot;
And I saw farther backward into Time,

And forward, than a man may see and live,
When I made Arthur king. I saw too far,
But not so far as this. Fate played with me
As I have played with Time; and Time, like me,
Being less than Fate, will have on me his vengeance.
On Fate there is no vengeance, even for God."

He does not come again to Broceliande, but lingers at Camelot in anticipation of the end which is to come—the end not only of a few men's lives but of a civilization turned inward now upon itself and weakened in its will. The last lines show him and Dagonet the Fool walking together in the gloom.

Fiercer now,
The wind was like a flying animal
That beat the two of them incessantly
With icy wings, and bit them as they went.
The rock above them was an empty place
Where neither seer nor fool should view again
The stricken city. Colder blew the wind
Across the world, and on it heavier lay
The shadow and the burden of the night;
And there was darkness over Camelot.

Mr. Robinson the realist—writing, however, poetry in his realism and not, as other trans-

lators of legend do, mere clever prose—has perceived the wonder of this situation to be not that Merlin saw so much, but that he, or any other man, could see no more. The fate of man is to see enough more than the beasts to know that there are gods but to see only that much; the tragedy of man, and perhaps his distinction, is simply that he cannot be God.

"Lancelot" is a study not merely of the love which the greatest of knights had for Guinevere, Arthur's Queen, and which was the seed from which sprouted the full bloody flower of Camelot's decay. It is in addition, and chiefly, a study of the various effects produced upon the men of the Round Table by the pursuit of the Holy Grail. Galahad was to come after with his perfect vision; but now the result of looking too long at the light is, for Lancelot at least, confusion and darkness. Lancelot's tragedy is the peculiarly human one of achieving clarity without gaining strength. Camelot is to be saved, if saved at all, by a strong mind whose illumination is

full and serene; and Lancelot's first assumption is that his may be that mind.

> "When I came back from seeing what I saw,
> I saw no place for me in Camelot.
> There is no place for me in Camelot.
> There is no place for me save where the Light
> May lead me; and to that place I shall go."

But later, when he has sounded himself, he cries:

> "God, what a rain of ashes falls on him
> Who sees the new and cannot leave the old!"

Through all of his interviews with the golden Queen at Joyous Gard, the castle whither he has taken her to be his own, or at Camelot, or last of all at Almesbury, Lancelot, like so many of Mr. Robinson's heroes, is a man paralyzed. Streams of eloquence, bursts of emotion, sinuous lines of reasoning do not efface the fact of his incurable doom; which is that he shall go down and take all Camelot with him. When the last dreadful tournament is over and the last war fought, the once unspotted knight creeps to Almesbury, the

nunnery to which Guinevere has been banished, and talks bravely for the moment that he is permitted to see her. But then

A slow and hollow bell began to sound
Somewhere above them, and the world became
For Lancelot one wan face—Guinevere's face.
"When the bell rings, it rings for you to go,"
She said; "and you are going . . . I am not.
Think of me always as I used to be,
All white and gold—for that was what you called me.
You may see gold again when you are gone;
And I shall not be there."—He drew her nearer
To kiss the quivering lips that were before him
For the last time. "No, not again," she said;
"I might forget that I am not alone . . .
I shall not see you in this world again,
But I am not alone. No, . . . not alone.
We have had all there was, and you were kind—
Even when you tried so hard once to be cruel.
I knew it then . . . or now I do. Good-bye."
He crushed her cold white hands and saw them falling
Away from him like flowers into a grave.
When she looked up to see him, he was gone;
And that was all she saw till she awoke
In her white cell, where the nuns carried her
With many tears and many whisperings.
"She was the Queen, and he was Lancelot,"
One said. "They were great lovers. It is not good
To know too much of love. We who love God

Alone are happiest. Is it not so, Mother?"—
The Mother replied; "and we are not all safe
Until we are dead. We watch, and pray."

Mr. Robinson had never written so poignantly as this before, and he was not to do so again until "Tristram," which again was to take him into the domain of passionate love—love passionate at all costs, including that of death. It is scarcely necessary to remark that the speeches of the nuns at the close of the passage just quoted are indeed the speeches of nuns, and that when they say it is not good to know too much of love—or to see too much of light—they are standing on this side of experience, not on that other side where tragedy takes place. It is not good, one can imagine Mr. Robinson saying, to know too much of anything; but it is necessary for great people thus to err—even while it is death for them to do so. Tragedy is necessary.

"TRISTRAM"

IV

"TRISTRAM"

"TRISTRAM" is the simplest, as it is perhaps the most passionate and direct, of Mr. Robinson's long narratives thus far. In it there are no abstract themes, of the sort which I have maintained were in its predecessors, to be labored over and elucidated. Its theme is the simplest known to poets and yet the subtlest—the love of a man and woman. Here for once Mr. Robinson's materials are all contained within that human nature which every person knows—though few, perhaps, know it in so passionate a guise. We have tragedy once more, but the elements which compose it have nothing of metaphysics in them; there is no Light, there is no excessive vision bringing its own mysterious punishment. We have simply two people in love, and we have

as the sole obstacles to their love a set of readily apprehended circumstances and those stubborn facts of life which disclose the final limitations of all love.

The story of Tristram and Isolt which Mr. Robinson has taken out of literature and legend is one of the most famous love stories of the world; it has enlisted the efforts of more gifted narrative poets than have ever combined within the past thousand years to tell another tale. It grew up among the people of mediaeval Britain, who gave it to Europe as soon as it had a transmissible form. French poets seem to have been the first to treat it with fulness and beauty; though the "Tristan und Isolde" of Gottfried von Strassburg, a thirteenth-century German poet, is one of the finest existing versions. Throughout medieval times the story, which began independently of the Arthurian cycle, was recounted in prose and verse as if it were a portion of King Arthur's legend; until we find Sir Thomas Malory's "Morte d'Arthur" containing it, and so rendering it definitely classical, in a much

elaborated and corrupted form. It has never ceased since Malory's day to hold the interest of English writers, though the nineteenth century was to see a particularly active revival of it by Matthew Arnold, Swinburne, Tennyson, and others. In Germany, and later throughout the world, Wagner, using Gottfried von Strassburg's poem for his source, gave the story currency through his opera, "Tristan und Isolde." More recently Thomas Hardy in England has made it the theme of a play in verse called "The Famous Tragedy of the Queen of Cornwall." And now Mr. Robinson, following Malory in so far as Malory associated Tristram with Camelot, retells the tale to make his history of Arthur's generation more complete. The connection of Mr. Robinson's new hero with Camelot is not so close that we are reminded of those abstract ideas which informed the "Merlin" and the "Lancelot." The connection is there, and it is interesting; but the time is an earlier one and the air for the most part is freer and clearer.

The poets who have treated the Tristram

story have made so free with it, elaborating here, inventing there, and always of course singling out different motives or scenes for emphasis, that it cannot be said to have any fixed form or course. Mr. Robinson, whose version I am convinced is the best in English since the Middle Ages, has taken his own liberties with it, as might have been expected of a poet possessed of so many ideas and so much personality. And since he is at so little pains to explain or even to mention those sections of the legend with which he does not deal at length, it seems desirable, before his poem is discussed, to summarize the legend in something like its entirety—assuming for the sake of clearness a composite plot which never existed in any one poem.

Tristram, or Tristan as he is usually called on the Continent, was the son of a sister of King Mark of Cornwall. His mother died at his birth, and from this circumstance he derived his dolorous or tristful name. Since his mother had been out of favor with King Mark, who is often represented by the me-

dieval poets as a vindictive man, Tristram was brought up away from the court, and was so well instructed by his tutor that he became the most famous of all living harpers, fighters, horsemen, linguists, and chess-players. Upon his restoration to Tintagel and the court of Mark he grew in favor and in fame until one year he was entrusted with the great mission of ridding Cornwall of an Irish tyrant, Gormond, who every year exacted a terrible toll from the Cornish people. Tristram in battle slays the Irish champion, Morolt (Morhaus), brother to Isolt (Iseult), Gormond's Queen; but received a wound which can be cured only by his going to Ireland to be tended by Isolt and her fair daughter of the same name —the heroine of the romance. He goes in disguise, is healed, and returns; but he brings the news of Princess Isolt's great beauty, and so is ordered to return and obtain her as Mark's Queen. He does so after many adventures and starts home with her across the Irish sea. But Isolt's mother has prepared a love potion which Brangwaine, the princess's waiting-

woman, shall administer to Mark and his bride in Cornwall; inadvertently this is drunk by Tristram and Isolt on the vessel that is carrying them to Tintagel. The result is a fatal love between them which nothing will extinguish while they live. In Cornwall, although Isolt becomes Mark's queen as had been planned, she loves only Tristram, who avails himself of every opportunity to be with her until Mark, convinced of his nephew's treachery after many refusals to believe the best of evidence, banishes him from the country. Tristram goes to Brittany, where after a war fought to free King Howel from an old enemy he receives for his reward the daughter of Howel, whose name is Isolt of the White Hand. He weds the new Isolt even though his love remains with Isolt of Ireland. At last, wounded in still another Breton war, he sends for his true love, asking that she fly a white sail from her vessel; a black sail will mean that Tristram's messenger is returning alone. Being too ill to rise and look for the vessel himself, he begs his wife to tell him what kind of sail

it carries. Isolt of the White Hand, through jealousy or through error, announces the black sign, and Tristram sinks to death just before Isolt of Ireland rushes in to find her lover's corpse and fall dead upon it. The two bodies are taken to Cornwall, where Mark, who has learned of the potion, buries them in a chapel, one along each wall. A sapling springs from the tomb of Tristram and sends a shoot down into the tomb of Isolt across the way.

Mr. Robinson, of course, does not tell all this. He cuts away the earlier portions of his hero's life; he makes no mention of any love potion—being sufficiently convinced that love by its very nature is potent to join and tear asunder forces that no juice could ever affect; he simplifies the matter of Tristram's meetings with Isolt; he stresses the participation, even at her pitiful distance, of the white-handed Isolt in the action as a whole; and he deepens the significance of the two deaths at the close. Andred, the slayer of Tristram, is no invention of Mr. Robinson, nor is the con-

nection he establishes between Tristram and the Round Table elaborated beyond the bounds of Malory; but the story as we find it here is very much Mr. Robinson's own. With all of his former concentration and intensity he has stripped the legend to its living minimum, has given it speed and tragic form, has tightened it into beauty of a sort that it never possessed before.

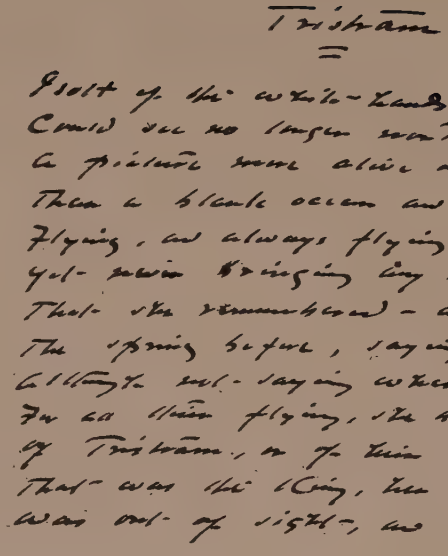
"Tristram" begins with Isolt of the White Hand looking out of her father's house in Brittany for a ship that may be bringing the Tristram she once saw as a child, years ago when he gave her an agate and promised lightly that he would some day come back to greet her. Her father's half-jesting remarks concerning the uncertainty of all such things do not affect her or convince her, since her faith in Tristram retains something of its childhood innocence; but at that very moment Tristram is standing in misery outside the hall at Tintagel where the wedding of Mark and Isolt of Ireland has taken place. First Gouvernail, the old knight who will re-

main faithful to the hero through all of his few days, comes with a message from Mark that Tristram is missed upstairs in the gay room; then Queen Morgan comes, who loves Tristram with a tigerish love; and finally Brangwaine, bringing Isolt behind her in the dark.

Coming down slowly and without a sound
She moved, and like a shadow saying nothing
Said nothing while she came. Isolt of Ireland,
With all her dark young majesty unshaken
By grief and shame and fear that made her shake
Till to go further would have been to fall,
Came nearer still to him and still said nothing,
Till terror born of passion became passion
Reborn of terror while his lips and hers
Put speech out like a flame put out by fire.
The music poured unheard, Brangwaine had vanished,
And there were these two in the world alone,
Under the cloudy light of a cold moon
That glimmered now as cold on Brittany
As on Cornwall.

In the conversation which follows it is made clear that the two had loved each other before ever the vessel set sail with them from Ireland, and that a declaration by either would have

averted the calamity of the marriage just made; but no declaration had been offered, since Isolt thought she hated Tristram for his killing of Morhaus and Tristram thought he must remain faithful to his uncle the King. Now they know how strong their love is—when it is too late. Soon they are warned of danger by a cry from Brangwaine, and Tristram snatches Andred out of the dark where he waits to kill him; and in another minute Mark is there, passing sentence of banishment on Tristram for the treachery that Andred announces he has overheard. Tristram walks out of Cornwall in delirium and is lost for days until Gouvernail finds him and takes him to the castle of Queen Morgan, who, nursing him back to health, wins for a time his grudging pretense of love. Tearing himself away from Morgan, Tristram sets sail for Brittany, where after a war fought for King Howel he marries, half out of pity and half out of intoxication with her name, Isolt of the White Hand. His thoughts lie always back in Cornwall, and his young wife knows it; but she


Tristram
=
Isolt of the white-hands, in Brittany,
Could see no longer southward anywhere
A picture more alive or less familiar
Than a black ocean and the same white birds
Flying, and always flying, and still flying,
Yet never bringing any news of him
That she remembered — who had sailed away
The spring before, saying he would come back,
Calling out saying when. Not one of them,
For all their flying, the night long, had heard the name
Of Tristram, or of him beside the helm
That was the King, her father. The last ship
Was out of sight, and there was nothing now

The opening lines of "Tristram" in the Author's handwriting

holds him with her delicate and lovely strength for as much time—two years—as fate allows her. Then Gawaine comes from Camelot to say that Arthur would have Tristram go there to be made a knight of the Round Table, and Tristram goes, never—as the white Isolt foretells—to return. For while he is at Camelot Mark is put in prison for an offense against Arthur, and Lancelot lends Tristram Joyous Gard wherein to live with Isolt of Ireland, fled there from Cornwall, while Mark is not a menace to their peace. The two spend a perfect summer together, which ends only when Tristram, returning one day from the forest, finds the castle empty and learns from Gawaine that Mark, escaped from prison, has sent a band of men to abduct Isolt and carry her back to Tintagel. This is the beginning of the lovers' descent to death. They have had their day; the rest is defeat and silence. Tristram, informed by a letter from Queen Morgan—who probably knows it will be death for him to go to Cornwall—that Isolt awaits him there, goes and

finds to his surprise that Mark's doors are open to him. For Mark has seen Isolt's face and understands at last that there is no longer any merit in his attempting to part the stricken lovers. The last conversation between Tristram and Isolt on a parapet overlooking the still sea is in a low key that prepares for the arrival of Andred with a knife. Tristram, stabbed before Mark can interfere, dies with Isolt on the parapet, and Mark is left alone to muse upon the meaning of such an end to such a love.

By the same parapet that overlooked
The same sea, lying like sound now that was dead,
Mark sat alone, watching an unknown ship
That without motion moved from hour to hour,
Farther away. There was no other thing
Anywhere that was not as fixed and still
As two that were now safe within the walls
Below him, and like two that were asleep.
"There was no more for them," he said again,
To himself or to the ship, "and this is peace.
I should have never praise or thanks of them
If power were mine and I should waken them;
And what might once have been if I had known
Before—I do not know. So men will say

In darkness, after daylight that was darkness,
Till the world ends and there are no more kings
And men to say it. If I were the world's maker,
I should say fate was mightier than I was,
Who made these two that are so silent now,
And for an end like this. . . .
There are some ills and evils
Awaiting us that God could not invent;
There are mistakes too monstrous for remorse
To fondle or to dally with, and failures
That only fate's worst fumbling in the dark
Could have arranged so well. . . .
There is too much in this
That intimates a more than random issue;
And this is peace—whatever it is for me.
Now it is done, it may be well for them,
And well for me when I have followed them,
I do not know."

No passage could more perfectly speak for Mr. Robinson than this one which in all of his poems he has never surpassed. Not only is it finely representative of his poetry at its most tactful, its most powerful, its most beautiful; it is also as compendious a statement as he would probably care to make concerning the degree of felicity attainable by men in this existence which is a battle between passion

and intellect, between chance and purpose, between destiny and wisdom. The only wisdom is that which comes after the event. Wisdom before experience is only words; wisdom after experience is of no avail. The wise man is a sad man who can only say that thus was so. And he will not claim that he might have ordered things better than they went. His respect for the brute strength of determined deeds prohibits such folly; his respect for the mind saves him, however, from weak wailing against fate. Perhaps it was better thus, perhaps it was not. Passion has its victories no less than reason. The tragic picture would be incomplete without either of these. It is because Mr. Robinson's picture is fairly complete that he deserves the rare title of major American poet.

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